DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 277 902 CE 046 197

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TITLE Advising Adult Learners. NACADA Task Force Report.
INSTITUTION National Academic Advising Association, Pomona, NJ.
PUB DATE 86
NOTE 50p.; Paper presented at the National Conference on Academic Advising (10th, Seattle, WA, October 12-15, 1986).
PUB TYPE Reference Materials - Bibliographies (131) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Academic Advising; Admission Criteria; *Adult Education; *Adult Students; *Counseling Objectives; *Counseling Services; Postsecondary Education; Program Content; Special Programs; *Student Needs

ABSTRACT

A study examined the scope of existing services for adult learners attending universities and colleges. Survey instruments designed to gather data on institutional support for adult learner services, special target groups identified by individual institutions, and institutional barriers confronted by adult learners on campus were mailed to a random sample of 439 members (one-third) of the National Academic Advising Association (NACADA). Two hundred thirty-three usable responses were received. Seventy percent of the institutions represented in the survey reported having altered program offerings in the past 5 years to accommodate the needs of adult learners. Seventy-nine percent provided academic advising and 78 percent offered career advising/counseling for adult learners. Other accommodations for adult learners included keeping offices open at nontraditional times, offering scholarships or other financial aid and special orientation sessions, providing placement services, and offering preparatory and refresher courses. Ninety-two percent of these programs and services for adults were offered on campus. Special services were offered at many institutions for such special needs groups as reentry women and men, blue-collar workers, adults with no previous college work, and community and business groups. Forty-three percent of the institutions offered special admission requirements that recognized the needs, skills, and/or circumstances of adults. (A 22-page bibliography on academic advising of adult learners in higher education is appended to this report.) (MN)

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NACADA Task Force Report

ADVISING ADULT LEARNERS

Fall, 1986

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NACADA TASK FORCE ON ADVISING ADULT LEARNERS

One of the benefits of NACADA's being a relatively young association is the flexibility to react to the professional needs of its membership. The original concern for advisors of adult learners surfaced at the 1984 National Conference. Adult learner advisors attending seemed to move en masse to every program offering which mentioned "adult." Efforts to begin an informal network were initiated at a roundtable discussion. This eventually resulted in the NACADA President forming a Task Force on Advising Adult Learners. Formal action to begin the Task Force efforts began at the 1985 conference. Small group discussions led to the identification of issues confronting adult student advisors and the identification of goals for the 1985-1986 year. Raising the consciousness of advisors to the special needs of adult learners was perhaps one of the most critical goals confronting the Task Force. To accomplish this goal it was critical that the Task Force first prepare a definition of the adult learner in colleges and universities. A second goal included the development of a bibliography on academic advising of adult learners in higher education. Conducting a national survey to determine to what degree and in what way institutions are responding to adult learners on their campuses was the final goal. This report is a compilation of the Task Force efforts and is to serve as a resource document for all those concerned with this special student population.

Central to any discussion on adult learners is a working definition of who is considered an adult. The Task Force would like to offer the following definition for consideration.

ADULT LEARNER DEFINED

Most definitions of an "adult learner" are age-based. Many institutions use either 24 or 25 as the age which divides the adult learner from the traditional student. Yet an age-based definition of an adult learner ignores the issue of developmental tasks as they relate to education.

A definition of the adult learner in developmental terms seems more appropriate than age-based definitions. A 20-year-old with a child and a job may be closer to what many of us consider an adult learner than a 24-year-old unmarried graduate student who has been in higher education since age 18.

The primary factor in differentiating the adult learner from the traditional student is the number of years a person has been away from formal education. The adult learner might be defined as a high school graduate or holder of a GED who has been away from formal education for at least two years. Adult students often pursue their education on a part-time basis.

Other factors could be added which relate to a general definition of adulthood. Work would play a central role. Most adult learners work either full- or part-time outside the home although many women may reenter from work inside the home.

Establishment of a home separate from parents is often used as a criterion of adulthood as are marriage and parenting. Marriage and parenting may be beyond the framework of our definition but responsibilities other than education are central to the definition. For most adult learners education is not the primary concern in their life.

A general definition of the adult learner in contemporary society would be "A person who is a high school graduate or holder of a GED, and who has been away from formal education for at least two years. The person may hold either a full- or part-time job, have established his/her own home and assumed roles other than that of student. The adult learner is often a part-time learner since education is often not his/her primary concern."

Adult Learner Services Survey

A National Survey

ADULT LEARNER SERVICES SURVEY

A National Survey

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Adult learners are enrolling in colleges and universities in record numbers and their ranks will continue to grow. Harman (1985) reports a 21% increase in 25- to 35-year-olds in postsecondary programs since 1980 and a 43% rise in enrollments of adults over age 35 as part-time learners. Hodgkinson (1985) indicates that only two and one-half million of America's 12 million students are "traditional"--18-22 years old, studying full time, and living on campus. Nearly half of all U.S. students are over age 25; half are enrolled part-time.

Over five million adults are currently enrolled in university or college credit programs (NCES, 1985). Arbeiter et al. (1979) estimate that more than 40 million Americans are currently engaging in a career change or are anticipating one in the future. Of these, 60% desire educational and career services. The National University Continuing Education Association (1986) predicts that, by the year 2000, 75% of all employed American workers will need to be retrained. Adults will continue to turn to higher education for job skills upgrades and for personal fulfillment.

Motivation for Reentry

Why do adults return to college? In a mail survey of 2,300 participants and their spouses from 15 continuing education for women programs, Astin (1978) said that becoming more educated, achieving independence and a sense of identity, and preparing for a job were the reasons most often cited for a return to education. Single, separated, divorced, and widowed women felt that job preparation was a more important goal than did married women. Reehling (1980) conducted a longitudinal study

of women enrolled in community colleges. In 1972, when she began the study, self-improvement and employment were listed almost equally by participants as their reasons for reentry. Surprisingly, however, in 1978 the respondents who had continued their educations since 1972 (three-fourths of the initial group) ranked self-improvement as the primary reason for their perseverance in an educational program. It appears that intrinsic reasons are higher motivators for adults to pursue their goals than are externally-based causes.

Although their study was not a long-term one, Wolfgang and Dowling (1981) had results similar to Reehling's. In a survey of 400 adult and traditional-age freshman and sophomore degree-oriented students at a large research university, they found striking differences between the motivations of the two groups. The older learners scored significantly higher than their younger colleagues on the motivational factor of cognitive interest. The adult students were less motivated than the traditional-aged students to pursue a college degree for the purposes of forming social relationships or meeting the external expectations of another person or authority.

Schlossberg (1984) indicates that a trigger event or nonevent sets into motion a transition, which could result in a return to college. The event may be the youngest child's starting school, divorce, job loss, or the realization of dissatisfaction with one's current employment. A nonevent which may serve as a trigger might be a promotion that never materializes or a marriage that never occurs.

Barriers to Participation

Johnstone and Rivera (1965) were probably the first authors to identify barriers to adult learning. They found that there was a general lack of knowledge about educational opportunities available to adults. Thirty-three

percent of the 12,000 Americans they surveyed didn't know whether or not educational services were available to them; 12% said that there were no such services. The researchers also found that awareness varied according to the subject matter in question, with respondents knowing more about practical and recreational courses and less about esoteric and self-fulfillment opportunities. Respondents indicated that they couldn't attend classes because of financial considerations, busy schedules, and tiredness at the end of the day.

It appears that barriers to adults' participation in education have not changed dramatically in the past 20 years. Darkenwald and Merriam (1982) echo Johnstone's and Rivera's findings that lack of information (or inaccurate information), lack of time, and cost are the most often cited reasons for non-participation. Darkenwald and Merriam go on to list other situational barriers, in addition to cost and lack of time: lack of transportation, lack of child care, and geographical isolation.

Other barriers identified by Darkenwald and Merriam are psychosocial and institutional. Psychosocial barriers relate to feelings that education for adults is inappropriate and perhaps even unpleasant and that an adult may be lacking in abilities as a learner. Institutional barriers include courses offered at inconvenient times, lack of adequate parking facilities, lack of child care, lack of financial aid for adult and/or part-time enrollees, and masses of red tape involved in admission and registration.

Characteristics and Needs of Adult Learners

The 1970s saw a huge influx of women, especially housewives, onto college campuses. The higher education and counseling literature was filled with articles about the returning woman student and how to develop programs for her (Roach, 1976; Brooks, 1976; McCrea, 1979). Today, however, the

adult woman student is often employed. Adult men are also attending college in large numbers. In a study of 10 urban universities (Davila, 1985a), 70% of students were employed, 31% were enrolled part time, 30% were over age 25, 94% were commuters, and 52% were female.

What is the adult student like? At first, usually very frightened. A 40-year-old learner said:

> In school, I'm an absolute infant and I feel dumb, dumb, dumb--like an intellectual basket case. I don't know how to do a term paper; I didn't even know what a term paper was. I don't really know how to use a library and all its reference sources, and how to pull out the material I need. (Rubin, 1979, p. 155).

Adults often fear that they're too old to learn; that they can't compete with younger college students; that they won't be able to manage all the responsibilities of classes, studying, job, and family; and that their study skills are rusty.

Smallwood (1980) found that the age of the returning adult played a role in determining the adult's needs. Her results indicated that younger women students were concerned about child care and about their relationships with their children, while older women expressed doubts about their abilities to succeed in college and to compete in traditionally male-oriented careers. Warchal and Southern (1984) wrote that adults are pragmatic. They want to see practical applications and they quickly lose patience with bureaucratic inefficiencies.

Lance, Mayo, and Lourie (1979) determined that adults expressed needs for special services, including: a designated reentry admissions counselor, orientation to campus, an exclusive lounge area, peer counselors, a specialized credit course for reentry students, speed reading, term paper writing skills, individual counseling, career exploration, education-vocational information, and workshops on career development and

communication skills. The authors found a tendency for women reentry students to express stronger needs than their male counterparts. They attribute this difference to sex role socialization: "Men are by tradition supposed to be able to be strong and adjust on their own, but women are supposed to be weak and too emotional for the larger world" (p. 484).

Advising Adult Learners

Farmer (1971) cautions that adult students are different from traditional-age students in the areas of age, psychological maturity, and social role. Advisors of adults should be aware of adult life development theory and career development theory. Schlossberg, Troll, and Leibowitz (1978) recommend that advisors be careful to prevent age bias and age stereotyping as they counsel adult learners.

An advisor's primary role in working with adult students is to assist them in overcoming the barriers to their successful participation in higher education. Informational barriers can be combated by disseminating information about the institution's programs throughout the community. This can be accomplished by sending college representatives to speak at college fairs and civic organization meetings, by mailing brochures to potential learners in the area and by sponsoring announcements on television and radio stations. Orientation workshops for adults help to meet their information needs once they have decided to attend a specific institution.

Advisors can act as advocates in encouraging college officials to remove institutional barriers to adults. Hunter College, an institution with a large percentage of adult students, enacted a number of reforms in order to better serve nontraditional learners. Among them are:

. Extended hours of the Registrar, Bursar, Admissions, and Evening Advising offices until 7:00 p.m.

- Began evening classes at 5:40 p.m. to allow time for travel from work to school
- Established "quick bite" food services with eateries open until the beginning of the last evening class
- Established a well-publicized security program and a "contact visit" system for persons on campus during off-hours
- Established Information Centers where commonly used forms and duplicating machines are available
- Established a Child Care Center to accommodate both day and evening students
- Extended hours of the Women's Center to include evenings (Davila, 1985b, p. 9)

Psychosocial barriers can be overcome by providing services to assist adults in improving their skills. A Field Evaluation Draft prepared by the Project on the Status and Education of Women (1980) suggests that refresher courses on study skills, reading skills, examination skills, writing skills, math and science skills, class communication skills, and time management skills are all helpful to returning adults. Support groups and peer counseling programs may also prove beneficial. Schlossberg (1984) indicates that a counselor can help adults in transition by assisting them to explore the transition through providing nonbiased relationships, by enabling them to understand the transition through uncovering their coping resources and providing a new perspective, and by empowering them to cope with the transition through an awareness of the transitional process and the influencing of action or inaction.

Situational barriers are probably the most difficult for advisors to impact because they often relate directly to an individual student's

personal circumstances. But advisors can provide some relief by working for financial aid reform in an attempt to secure more grants, loans, and scholarships for adult and part-time students. Establishing child care facilities and situating courses on a part of the campus near the busline may also assist those adults who may otherwise be unable to attend classes.

It is evident that advisors of adult learners are concerned about this student population. The magnitude of concern surrounding barriers confronting adult learners became apparent at the 1984 NACADA conference in Philadelphia. To determine higher education's sensitivity to these barriers and to determine current efforts being made to serve these advisees, the NACADA Task Force on Advising Adult Learners decided to conduct a national survey.

PROCEDURES

A survey questionnaire was developed to study the scope of existing services for adult learners attending today's universities and colleges. The instrument used in gathering the survey information was created by the NACADA Task Force for Advising Adult Learners. Items included in the questionnaire assess such things as institutional support for adult learner services, existing services for this student population, special "target" groups identified, and institutional barriers confronted by adult learners on campus. It was mailed to a random sample consisting of one-third of the NACADA membership (439). Two hundred thirty three usable responses were returned (53%). The following summarizes the results of the Adult Learner Services Survey (detailed information and further analysis will be submitted to the NACADA Journal for publication).

RESULTS

Institutional Changes

It appears as though higher education institutions have begun to react to the increasing numbers of adults appearing on today's campuses. Seventy percent of all institutions represented had, within the last five years, altered program offerings and their schedules to accommodate the needs of adult learners. Of that percentage, 18% had made substantial changes. Additionally, 77% of the institutions were providing student support services to accommodate this increasing student population. Twenty percent of these institutions indicated they had substantial student support services for adults. These facts coupled with the fact that 85% of the respondents felt their central administration's attitudes were favorable toward providing educational and support services to adult learners suggest that higher education has heard the special concerns voiced for and by adult learners.

Existing Student Services

Respondents were asked to provide information on the types of special services their institutions currently provide for adults (see Table 1).

Table 1

EXISTING STUDENT SERVICES

Service	Percentage
Offices opened at nontraditional times	56
Scholarships or other financial aid	36
Special orientation sessions designed for adult learners	60
Career advising/counseling	78
Placement services	51
Preparatory courses; refresher courses	50
Ongoing support groups	52
Academic advising	79
Adult resource center	23
Prior learning assessment	35

The majority of the institutions provided academic advising (79%) and career advising/counseling for adult learners (78%). In more than half of the institutions represented the following special services had been implemented for adult learners: special orientation sessions (60%), offices opened at non-traditional times (56%), on-going adult support groups (52%), placement services (51%) and preparatory/refresher courses (50%). Minimal assistance to adults was provided in the areas of financial aid/scholarships (36%) and prior learning assessment (35%). Unique programming efforts appeared in the responses found in the "other" category. Some institutions reserved sections of "core" credit courses (such as Introduction to Algebra) for students 25 and over, others had special television broadcasts into the

workplace and two had created a non-traditional student union. Only four respondents indicated that child care facilities were provided.

Where and When Services Are Provided

As one might expect, an overwhelming majority of the programs and services for adults were offered on campus (92%). It is encouraging to note that these were offered both during the day (86%) and evening (71%). Fewer colleges have extended programs and service offerings into weekend hours (36%). Forty-one percent of the respondents indicated that similar services were provided in off campus locations.

Special Target Groups

As indicated in Table 2, only 40% of the institutions represented directed programs and services toward specific adult populations.

Table 2

SPECIAL TARGET GROUPS

Group	Percentage
Reentry women	74
Reentry men	49
Blue collar workers	23
Adults with no previous college work	50
Adults with GED	38
Community and business groups	47
Professional groups	40
Workers seeking retraining	37

The majority of the programs were aimed toward reentry women (74%). Other targeted groups included adults with no previous college coursework (50%), reentry men (49%), and community and business groups (47%). Programs and services were less likely to be extended towards blue collar workers (23%) and workers seeking retraining (37%). Responses which fell into the "other" category included target groups such as the elderly, unions, as well as unemployed, underemployed, and disadvantaged adults.

Admission Requirements

Special admission requirements that recognize the needs, skills, and/or circumstances of adults were used by 43% of the institutions represented. Forty-three percent of the respondents indicated that special admissions requirements were not necessary. This only appeared to be a concern for 14% of the respondents.

Nontraditional Delivery Systems

It appears as though institutions have been cautious as they modify their educational delivery systems to accommodate this emerging student population (see Table 3).

Table 3

SPECIAL COURSE/DEGREE OFFERINGS FOR ADULT LEARNERS

Offering	Percentage
Evening classes	92
Weekend classes	55
Television classes	47
Radio classes	6
Newspaper classes	4
Correspondence work	24
Independent study	77
Audiocassette	10
All courses required for a degree at nontraditional times	28
External degree	15
Degree designed especially for adults and awarded only to nontraditional students	13

Only 24% of those represented were offering many non-traditional course offerings. However, 50% of the respondents indicated that their institutions were beginning to incorporate new course formats and schedules into their traditional structures. Evening classes (92%), independent study courses (77%) and weekend courses (55%) were the most frequently cited non-traditional delivery systems. Television courses (47%) appeared to be the only media-related source colleges and universities have used to any extent. Other media sources such as audio cassettes (10%), radio (6%), and newspaper courses (4%) were less likely to be utilized for delivering coursework to adults.

Advising Services

Fifty-four percent of those responding indicated special advising services (outside the normal, routine advising) were available for adult learners on their campuses. Few respondents advised adult learners for the majority of their time (12%). Fifty-two percent actually spent less than one-fourth their time working with adults.

The majority of adult advising services were accessible on campus during the day. Adults had these special advising services available during evening hours in 62% of the institutions represented. Off campus advising (31%) and weekend advising (17%) was less likely to be available. Career advising was available in 89% of the campuses.

Institutional Barriers

Further evidence supporting higher education's sensitivity to the adult student population is seen in Table 4.

Table 4

INSTITUTIONAL BARRIERS

Barrier	Degree of Barrier (percentages)		
	major	minor	no problem
Admission policies	5	28	66
Lack of centralized information source	11	36	53
Lack of financial aid	35	47	38
Lack of developmental classes	18	42	40
Administrators' attitudes	12	37	51
Faculty attitudes	12	41	47
Lack of access to classes--time or location	30	48	22

Those surveyed indicated there were two major barriers confronting adults who desired to pursue an education at their institutions--lack of financial aid (35%) and lack of access to classes either due to time or location (30%). It is impressive to note that outside these two areas most of the barriers listed are of minor importance or present no problem for adult learners. When respondents listed "other" barriers which they felt were operating in their institutions they included such items as: inflexible curriculums, little credit given for life and work experiences and open admission policies which allowed adults the chance to avoid assistance--such as advising and orientation.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

It's very encouraging that such a large number of colleges and universities are making programmatic changes to better serve the adult learner. Nearly all survey respondents (92%) offer evening classes for adult students, 79% provide special academic advising for this population, 60% have designed special orientation sessions, and 56% have office hours at non-traditional times. Another excellent sign is the strong support of programs for adults by institutional administration (85% reported favorable attitudes).

But American colleges and universities must continue to make changes and improvements in order to provide optimum learning opportunities for the increasing numbers of reentry adults. Little is being done, for instance, in the areas of innovative delivery of advisement and degree programs and provision of alternative methods of earning credits. Only 28% of the survey respondents indicated that all courses required for a degree are offered at non-traditional times and a mere 15% offer external degrees.

DiSilvestro (1981) describes a number of unusual advisement programs for adult learners. Among the ideas presented are telephone counseling, an audio tape information service, computer-assisted counseling, programmed self-instructional material, counseling at off-campus community locations, and workplace counseling. Cross (1978) recommends a self-assessment kit or central assessment agency to help learners gain academic credit for non-college learning. She indicates that there are three approaches to the granting of such credit: credit by examination, credit for experiential learning through an assessment of the individual's competencies, and credit via evaluation of non-college courses or educational programs. Other methods of earning credit include correspondence courses, teleconferencing, radio courses, and courses offered through home computer link-ups with campus computers.

Large percentages of institutions offer programs for special adult populations, with the greatest number of services (74%) being designed for the returning woman student. It's important, though, that advisors continue to be in touch with trends in their communities and how they can best serve new groups of special students. For example, the closing of a large plant near a college campus may provide an excellent opportunity for the college to institute a re-training program for unemployed workers.

Most advisors spend 24% or less of their time advising adult students. Colleges and universities may want to consider appointing one or more staff members to be full-time advisors to adults. These professionals could be experts in adult life development theory, career development theory, and mid-career change strategies. The designation of a special advisor for them may indicate to the adult students who attend the institution that they are taken seriously; that they're more than just a sideline.

To combat the barrier of lack of financial aid, advisors must be advocates, both on a national level and their own campuses, for more aid dollars and programs for the full-time and part-time adult learner. Advisors can also assist by making adult students fully aware of all the types of scholarships, grants, and loans for which they are currently eligible. Advisors can work to overcome the barrier of lack of access to classes by talking to administrators and faculty about offering courses at non-traditional times and locations.

As the adult learner comprises increasingly larger percentages of our student populations, college and university environments must continue to be modified in order to meet the special needs of this important group.

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Commentary by an Advisor to Adult Learners

I feel strongly that advisors to adults need to be an example to other advisors on campus. We need to be informed aobut the options available to adults seeking educational opportunities on our campus. We need to expand advising to include working to provide support services such as remedial courses and career planning. We need to form community and campus networks for effective referrals. For years I worked to serve what I thought were the special needs of adult students, and then I realized they need what every student needs--excellent advising. Right now and in the future, advisors to adults can be positive examples to other advisors.

Advisors to adults can and should be instruments of change on their campuses. We are in a position to speak to the issue of how institutional rules and practices affect specific groups of students as well as individuals. We are also in a position to be advocates for adult students.

Advisors to adults need to make their own contribution to research. We need to keep records that will verify how many non-traditional students we have advised. Our records should also indicate the background of these prospective or enrolled students and something of their hopes and dreams for their academic future. Having data such as this enhances an advisor's ability to be an instrument of change on the college or university campus.

Advisors to adults need to become involved in organizations that can encourage their professional growth. Of course NACADA is the obvious first choice, but there are others that can serve in this capacity. Many advisors have come from academic disciplines. We need to remember our academic roots and nurture these intellectual connections as well.

Advisors to adults need to remember to be sensitive to the person across from them. Often the most supreme act of will was required of the

adult who has come to see the advisor. Many times we cannot solve the problem of the person with whom we are meeting; many times we will not have even a suggestion of an option. Always, however, we can remember that we are dealing with a person and do what we can to make our being together a meaningful human exchange.

Finally, I think advisors to adults need to remember to be excited and pleased to be at the forefront of an exciting movement in higher education. It is our challenge to be the entrepreneurs on college and university campuses!

Mary Ann Murray
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Advising Adult Learners:

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